

In speaking of the concept of *teshuva* , usually translated “repentance” but literally denoting “return”, I have had occasion during these Days of Awe in past years to make mention of the story of the German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig, who serves as a prime example of the individual who **returns** from the margins of Jewish involvement to active engagement with Jewish practice and tradition. Born into an assimilated Jewish family and steeped in the academic study of philosophy, Rosenzweig during the years preceding World War I was seriously contemplating conversion to Christianity. Deciding to enter Christianity as its earliest apostles had (as a Jew), Rosenzweig attended Yom Kippur services at an orthodox synagogue in Berlin. The experience so moved him that he no longer felt the need to take the next step and become a Christian, opting instead to embark on a gradual return to his Jewish roots and to write one of the classics of modern Jewish thought, *The Star of Redemption*. Following service in the military, he settled in Frankfurt where he established the Lehrhaus, an academy for adult Jewish study, and collaborated with Martin Buber on an innovative German translation of the *Tanakh*. Tragedy struck when Rosenzweig, still in his mid-thirties, was diagnosed with ALS, a progressive neuro-muscular disease that left him disabled and confined to his home. To accommodate his desire to participate in Shabbat worship, a *minyan*, which included some of the outstanding thinkers in German Jewry, would gather in his home weekly. Unlike Buber, whom some have described as a “religious anarchist” and who was indifferent if not hostile to the whole structure of rabbinic law, Rosenzweig found himself moving in the direction of traditional *halachic* observance. Once, however, a friend asked Rosenzweig whether he followed the practice of donning *tefillin* for the recitation of daily morning prayers, and Rosenzweig answered – not “yes” or “no” – but “not yet.”

What a wonderful answer! Rosenzweig was honest enough to admit that he had not yet fully embraced traditional practice but was indicating that he was still grappling with the question of defining his personal observance, still open to taking upon himself the obligation of additional *mitzvot*. If we were to have a logo for our observance of the Days of Awe, I would suggest that along with an image of the *shofar* it include the words “not yet”. The world has not yet been redeemed and is rife with oppression, violence, injustice, cruelty and deceit. And we, every one of us, have not yet fulfilled our potential

to be the better persons – compassionate, kind, empathetic, devoted to the pursuit of justice and the common good – that we are capable of becoming. Regarding the question of Jewish observance posed to Rosenzweig, none of us have as yet fully plumbed the depths of Jewish history, lore and tradition nor exhausted the potential for meaning and spiritual connection that Jewish worship and ritual can confer. The *shofar* calls on us to acknowledge that the world is not yet as it can and should be nor are we. It challenges us to stir from our complacency and self-satisfaction and to be open to renewed effort and striving to change ourselves and our world for the better.

Two Scriptural readings, both read in the synagogue during the summer time, convey much the same lesson. You recall the story found in the book of Numbers of the revolt against Moses' leadership, led by Moses' own cousin Korach. Buber, in his biography of Moses, reads this tale as a conflict between the two regarding the idea of holiness. Korach states his position; *kol ha'edah kulam kedoshim*, that all of the community are holy, and therefore there is no need for Moses to "lord it over" the Israelites and to give them a Torah and commandments to follow. The presence of God within the Israelite camp, as symbolized by the Tabernacle, is sufficient to guarantee the holiness of the people. Regarding *Kedushah*, holiness, Korach claims that the people are already there. Although Moses does not explicitly rebut Korach's assertion, were he to address it, he would reply with the words "not yet." The people, Moses knows, have not yet attained holiness. Moses admittedly has spoken of the Israelite people as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but this is more in the way of an aspiration and an ideal than the description of a reality. This is why Moses has deposited in the Ark, the footstool of God's throne, the very location where God's Presence is alleged to reside, the tablets of the Covenant, whose words the people must heed if they are to become holy. For Korach, there is nothing more for the people to do other than take satisfaction and pride in their status. For Moses, if holiness is to be attained, there is a path that must be followed and choices to be made in each of our lives and in the life of the community.

If we roll the Torah scroll a bit farther into the book of Numbers, we come to the tale of Balaam, the soothsayer hired by the king of Moab to pronounce a curse on the Israelites, who were encamped on the king's borders. The Torah relates that God wrought a miracle, and each time that Balaam opened his mouth to curse, the words were

transformed into blessing. The most famous of Balaam's words of blessing is the verse, *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*, how goodly are your tents O Jacob. That verse is the opening line of a prayer recited when we enter the sanctuary for worship, a prayer that in the beautiful musical setting by Lewandowski has become part of our choir's repertoire. The Haftorah that corresponds to the Torah portion of Balaam is from the prophet Micah. The connection between Torah and Haftorah lies in Micah's rebuke of the people, who have forgotten all of God's benefactions toward them including the frustration of Balaam's evil designs and the changing of curse into blessing, which Micah explicitly mentions. But Rabbi Shai Held, from whose weekly *divrei Torah* I derive great inspiration and insight, finds an additional connection based on a striking similarity of language. The people acknowledge the truth of Micah's rebuke and proceed to ask how they can make up for their ingratitude. Can they atone for their sin by bringing an abundance of offerings to the Temple? Micah in turn responds with the classic summation of Judaism's essence. Sacrifices and offerings are not what God desires. It has been told to you *mah tov*, what is good and what God requires of you, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. Balaam, the soothsayer, proclaims *mah tovu*, how goodly, seeing in the Israelite encampment a static beauty and perfection already attained. Micah, the prophet, lays out for the people *mah tov*, what is good in God's sight, an active striving toward the ideals of justice, compassion and humility, which have not yet been fully realized.

The recognition that we and our world could be better is the basis for this season of repentance and return. I find myself at times, after I have done something or said something that was thoughtless, hurtful or inconsiderate, thinking, "That's not me; I know better, and I really am better than that." My words and actions, however, give evidence to the contrary, and I know that in the future I must not content myself with reassuring thoughts but must actively strive to be the better person I want to be. We begin the season with the unfinished business of making amends for the misdeeds and shortcomings of the year gone by, but we do so in order that we might enter the New Year with a clean slate, renewed and with the determination to be better and to make our world better in the year to come.

The effort to grow, to change, to improve and to repair reflects a dynamism that is the sign of life. Remaining static is a state of being that might be likened to a spiritual death. The world of ancient paganism, according to the writer Thomas Cahill in *The Gifts of the Jews* was essentially a static and unchanging world. Human life on earth was viewed as a pale reflection of ever-recurring and unchanging realities in the sphere of the gods. It was the ancient Israelites who gave to the world the notion of history (rather than nature) as the arena of interaction between God and humans, history as a process in which there was movement and direction.

Cahill notes that another contribution the Israelites made was the idea of a journey as a significant undertaking. I associate this with father Abraham, the subject of our Torah readings on these two days of Rosh Hashanah. His journey from his birthplace in Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan symbolizes a break with the mythological thinking that was prevalent in the ancient world and may be viewed as the foundational event of western monotheism. But his was not the only journey recorded in Scripture. The bulk of the Torah text is set in the context of a forty year journey between Egypt and the Promised Land. Think now of what such a journey implies – the notion that we are not yet where we need to be. Abraham living in an established center of civilization in Mesopotamia among idol-worshipping polytheists was not yet in a position to propagate his radical new religious idea. To be free to do so, he had to journey to distant Canaan. Likewise, the Israelites in Egypt were enslaved to a flesh and blood king, not yet enjoying the freedom that would enable them to serve the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. They needed, first of all, to be liberated from human bondage and then to embark on a journey to a land of their own, where they could establish a commonwealth devoted to the service of God.

It is a commonplace to think of the individual's life in terms of a journey. In biological terms, the journey (as the poem which I read at funerals says) has both a beginning, birth, and a destination, death. But in spiritual terms, the destination – holiness and the perfection of our ethical attributes of justice and mercy – is one we never reach. No matter how hard we try, how much we grow in kindness, fairness, devotion – we will always have the sense of not yet being there. We need to hold up before ourselves the ideal, the goal for which we strive but which we never quite attain. Provided we accept

our limitations, our shortcomings and our lapses as normal and not indulge in excessive self-reproach and obsessive guilt, the gap between the ideal and actual can be a fruitful tension in our life, spurring us to ethical and spiritual growth. It's not easy, by any means; the force of habit and of inertia is strong. Day to day routines and familiar patterns of interacting with others are our comfort zone. But complacency and self-satisfaction are the obstacles to be avoided, if we are to truly lead a life of piety and holiness.

In the areas of interpersonal relations and social justice, the recognition that we are not yet holy and that doing what is good requires unceasing effort to cultivate the qualities of *chesed* and *mishpat*, mercy and justice, has implications that are obvious. There is always room for improvement and for doing more to better ourselves and our world – *tikkun midot* (repairing our moral and ethical attributes) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

But as the question posed to Rosenzweig about *tefillin* reminds us, being a good Jew has additional components. There are multiple streams and varieties of Jewishness, each of which has its own definition of being a good Jew. What most of them include in common is an emphasis on Jewish knowledge, familiarity with the history, texts and culture that have been passed down to us, Jewish practice, whether viewed as folkways or as *mitzvot*, and identification with and concern for our fellow Jews wherever they reside. Rabbi Held in his *dvar Torah* reminds us that here too, the concept of “not yet” applies. No matter how familiar a text from the Torah is and no matter how many times we have studied it, we have not yet exhausted its potential meanings. The need to pray, to connect with something greater than and beyond the self, is said to exist independent of what we believe about ultimate reality. But no matter how intently we focus in our prayer, we find that we have not yet achieved the level of devotion for which we strive. Or, as Rabbi Held puts it, when it comes to the art of prayer, we are all beginners.

Children who are taken on a long automobile trip will inevitably ask, “Are we there yet?” Make a list for yourself of the traits and qualities that would characterize the person you want to be. Describe the features of a community, a society, a nation as it would be in an ideal world. Then ask yourself, “Am I there yet?” “Is the world there

yet?” The answer, of course, is no and, given the constraints of the human condition will always be no. But the important thing for us, as we journey through life, is to be moving in the direction of increased holiness, goodness, justice and compassion and to be impelling history in the direction of redemption.

We pray at this season that we be inscribed in the book of life. This is my fervent prayer for you and for all of our dear ones – life and health, happiness and fulfillment. In our ongoing pursuit of holiness, our continual striving for the good, and our openness to *mitzvot*, may we be truly alive.